

The Potential of Pacific Island Traditional Wrestling

Unlike any other sport, wrestling is instinctive to the nature of our species and as an activity has been part of the human cultural experience since the very beginning. This is as true for Oceania as any other geographical division of the world and by tapping into this agonistic mindset we can potentially induce major societal changes from patterns of behaviour that are highly destructive for group cohesion, to those that are instead constructive. This is obviously a bold claim to make for a single sport, one that some may even contest but the evidence before us is conclusive, in the past our ancestors understood the wisdom of this concept and enacted it with all the positive consequences that this entailed. In more recent history, the impacts of colonialism have eroded this time honoured custom and the poor outcomes that have eventuated, in hindsight were inevitable. There is no reason to believe however that this has to continue unchallenged and we have before us an opportunity to bring a revival to this ancient combat ritual, along with all the benefits we know it had in the past. Of course this all starts with education and the brief examination below looks at the traditional sport in the cultural divisions of Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia, which will prove beyond doubt the veracity of the above claims.

Polynesia



In the tiny atoll of Pukapuka in the northerly parts of the Cook Islands, the Maori people have maintained an ancient type of wrestling called popoko, according to mythology since the first sailing canoes arrived in the area. As the above photos suggest, the young men don thick belts called maro that are woven from coconut fibre and in a ritualistic procession, annually march from their villages to a communal meeting ground. The competitions pit the wrestlers of each section of the island against each other but they never compete for personal glory and instead it is always for the honour of their group. The game is a simple one, whoever falls first concedes defeat but the ceremonies surrounding it are quite complex, involving songs and dances that are just as integral to play as any other aspect of the activity. To the Pukapukans, popoko is a ritual that not only allows their young men to express their innate aggressive tendencies in a controlled outlet, thus facilitating social cohesion and reducing incidence of social violence, but it is also regarded as an ethnic identifier. In this way, expatriate Pukapukan communities maintain the custom in far off shores and the last two photos show it being played in the suburbs of Brisbane. With a population of less than 500 souls worldwide, it is a big ask of these people to take responsibility as sole custodians of a tradition that once spanned the entire Pacific Ocean but by leaving them isolated in this practice this is exactly what we are doing. It is time that the rest of the global human community acknowledged what these people have achieved by preserving this wonderful ancient sport and offer them assistance to continue long into the future.



First contact literature recorded how wrestling was utilised in an identical manner across Polynesia and Captain Cook in particular gave vivid accounts of the sport as he witnessed it in Tonga, Tahiti and Hawaii. These events were even illustrated by the ship's artists, as can be seen above and from this we know traditional wrestling was a widespread custom. What is remarkable is that these accounts describe a sport that was played in the exact same manner across all the islands of Polynesia, just as it still is in Pukapuka and by standardising rules of play meant that visitors were often welcomed to the islands through this ritual. Unfortunately this is not the case today and besides Pukapuka, the only other places where the sport continues to survive are in Tuvalu and Tokelau, with the rest of Polynesia barely remembering its most ancient cultural activity.



As above, in 1940 the Dr H. S. Evans photographed hula wrestling still vibrantly being played on Rotuma Island, a Polynesian Outlier in the north of Fiji and the American anthropologist Alan Howard said it was still present while he spent a year there in 1960. When he returned in 27 years later however he said he could find nobody with an interest in the subject and this is but one example of the extinction of the sport in the Pacific. In New Zealand several colonial era accounts give vivid descriptions of types of wrestling known variously as ringaringa, te mamau or whakatoto, which were all uncannily like popoko and in 1950 the Muriwhenua tribes of Northland were photographed still practicing it as a way to control the hostilities in the young men of their Iwi. These sports however have completely vanished from the landscape and despite the spectacular revival of the indigenous weapons martial arts of Aotearoa, te mau rākau alongside the Maori haka war dance, as per this photo, traditional wrestling has yet to be included as part of this. The introduction of Christianity also eroded the presence of the sport in Samoa and Tonga due to their pagan heritage and with these cases as precedents, common sense tells us the few surviving examples of Polynesian traditional wrestling are truly endangered customs.

Melanesia



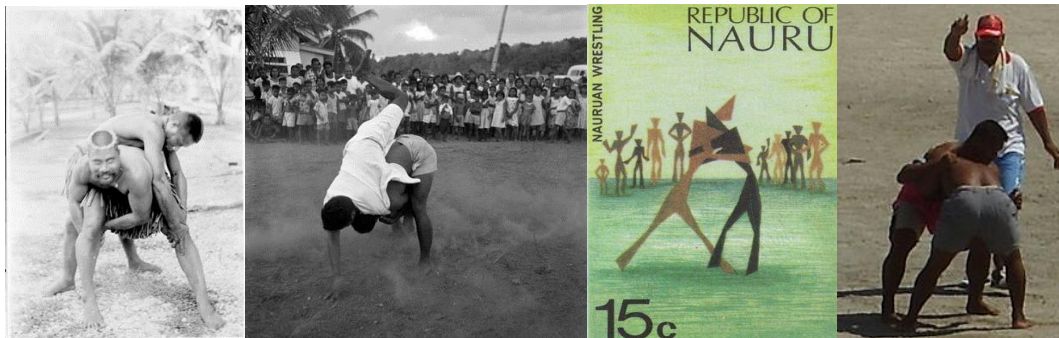
Human beings have been present in Australia, New Guinea and the Melanesian Islands longer than anywhere else in Oceania and cave art indicates that wrestling has a minimal antiquity in this region of 30,000 years, possibly the oldest evidence of the sport anywhere in the world. The activity was poorly documented in the colonial era however and there are only a handful of accounts that survived to modern times. North Queensland Aboriginal men from the Cape York Peninsula were photographed playing a throwing sport called arungga in 1901 and the ethnologist Walter Roth gave vivid descriptions of it at that time. Like many other parts of Oceania, traditional wrestling seems to have since gone by the wayside due to the imposition of foreign cultural standards. In the Highlands of PNG the Enga people have kept the sport alive and still utilise it at popular gatherings called Sing Sings. The Oxfam volunteer Steve Hamilton can be seen in the photo above participating in such a bout in 2005. In the Solomon Islands a stamp was issued to commemorate a Custom Wrestling event held at Christmas time in 1983 and the sport is still seen on rare occasions throughout both the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, but like in Australia it seems to have died out completely in New Caledonia and Fiji.

Micronesia



In the Federated States of Micronesia, like Polynesia, first contact records tell us that traditional wrestling was once a popular activity and the artist Jacques Arago captured it in this painting from the Caroline Islands in 1819. Between 1915 till 1945 these islands were included as part of the Japanese South Pacific Mandate and as demonstrated by this black & white photo taken in 1921, the traditional sport was often merged with the similar style of Japanese wrestling, sumo. The influence of the USA in the region today means that parts of Micronesia are well supported in their wrestling programs but unfortunately there has been no investment given for the revival of the traditional versions of the sport. Beach wrestling however has been included as an event at both the Pacific Games and the Micronesian Games and this sport in many ways resembles the older custom, as shown by this photo from Palau in 2010. Such enthusiasm implies there is a hunger from the people

of these islands to see their ancient combat customs restored once again to life and with even minimal financial assistance much could be achieved in this area.



In the republics of Nauru and Kiribati traditional wrestling has been maintained however and it is regarded as a beloved inheritance from the ancestors, the only such custom that survives into our era. Men were photographed playing eakabarere, as it is called in Nauru, in 1900 when the island was administered by Germany and in 1962, when it was jointly administered by Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain. The sport has continued to be played at all Independence Day Celebrations since 1968 and the issuance of this stamp indicates how cherished this sport is to both the national government and the indeed all locals. The same is true in Kiribati where an almost identical sport called te bomwane exists and this photo from 2012 shows it being played at a festival on Tarawa Island.

The Potential

As the above overview suggests, traditional wrestling was once widely endorsed throughout Oceania and in some places it still lingers as a treasured habit, despite all the social forces working against it. In talking to members from those communities that maintain the custom however there is a concern that these ancient sports may one day vanish altogether and they openly express their fears of such a thing happening. The reasons they want to maintain the existence of traditional wrestling are numerous but mainly relate to their sense of identity; this is something passed on to them by their ancestors. They are concerned that if these sports disappear, so does their collective existence as a unique people and therefore they are willing to do whatever is required to preserve them. Combined with traditional song, dance, body decoration and pagentry, Pacific Island traditional wrestling brings a natural spectacle to the performance and as such it is easy enough to attract media attention to them. With appropriate levels of support, these communities could be coordinated to work together in unison to display these sports at a combined event and this was most commonly done in the past during the Polynesian Matariki Festivals. Designed to coincide with the rising of Pleiades star cluster during the winter solstice at June 21, warfare was made taboo and the community was then committed to enact playful games such as popular wrestling tournaments. This ceremony of renewal was documented across Oceania from Easter Island to Hawaii and New Zealand, due to cross cultural contacts in the distant past, this even included most of Melanesia and Micronesia.

Although the images supplied in this paper indicate that Pacific Island traditional wrestling was a highly masculine sport, women and children were never excluded from the performance, in fact as

audience members they were integral to it. Although there is no documentation that they ever wrestled, women strangely enough competed in stick fighting and boxing events in front of the crowds and performed their own song and dance rites to welcome the champion wrestlers to the field; likewise victors were celebrated through similar acts. As already implied, it was common knowledge that by performing the sport in such a ceremonial manner this brought much good to their society. It allowed young men an avenue to express any of their aggressive tendencies in an honourable way and they were never expected to perpetually bottle up such emotions as young men in modern societies are today. Thus their mana, their life force, was evenly distributed across across the whole community, preventing it from growing into something dangerous for everyone else.

Very different to modern combat sports like mixed martial arts for example, strict rules of play limited the repertoire of techniques to just holding, lifting, tripping and throwing, with a single fall all that was required to finish a match. This ritual therefore avoided much of the brutality we usually associate with fight sports today and a sense of dignity was closely associated with practitioners. Through regular training in the sport, young men were taught not only wrestling manouvres but actually what behavioural standards were expected of men in society and the protection of women and children was crucial to this; morality was encoded in the practice of the sport. These strongman wrestlers were prevented from openly expressing egotistical traits because they always fought on behalf of their entire village rather than for their own glory and in this way Pacific Island traditional wrestling was very different to most modern sports. We can still see similar events happening in other parts of the world such as in Senegal West Africa, where the traditional sport is more popular than football, in Turkey with its world famous Kirkpınar oil wrestling festival in June or even in Mongolia with the Nadaam Festival of three manly sports in July. But Japan still holds popular professional sumo tournaments six times a year and it is this sport that bares the greatest likeness to Pacific Island traditional wrestling. Being a sport indigenous to a group of islands in the north-west of the Pacific Ocean, it is most probable that sumo shares a common heritage with the other wrestling traditions of the Pacific and possibly through this link a future partnership can be arranged. The Oceania Sumo Union has national bodies in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa, it has already expressed the idea of closely associating sumo with Pacific Island traditional wrestling and running concurrent tournaments if it can get future funding to do so.

From what we now know of Pacific Island traditional wrestling, while presently on the verge of complete extinction, the potential for this to become a world acclaimed event future is actually high. All that is required is financial assistance for start up costs, once this is set in motion, with a centralised management structure it would eventually become self perpetuating. In the process of reviving traditional patterns of behaviour across the region, negative consequences in rates of drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and suicide could be significantly reduced. Empowering the traditional male responsibility of raising boys has a knock on effect of empowering the traditional role of women in society and as the ancestors well knew, such balance was imperative to the healthy functioning of the community. With minimal funding much could be achieved by going down this path.

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